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## **Communication, Mass Media and Social Responsibility: A Trinitarian Relationship**

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### **Abstract**

Communication is central to all forms of human endeavour and as such, its role in the society is indispensable. For the media to fully achieve its functions there is the need for accountability and social responsibility to the society and the audience in particular. This paper examines the basic issues in communication media and social responsibility. It is a descriptive research in which data and information were gathered from secondary sources like books and documents. It was found out that no human endeavour can succeed without communication. The paper also revealed that the mass media are in a fiduciary relationship with the society. It is therefore recommended that mass media operator should be professionally conscious in order to meet audience expectations from the media. Again, the mass media operators should make the media show accountability and responsibility through fair, accurate and objective reportage.

**Keywords:** Communication, Interaction, Information Management, Professionalism and Social Responsibility

## **Introduction**

Communication, mass media, media accountability and social responsibility constitute a pivot to the smooth running of the society and its various components. Although communication exists at all times with human beings, it takes place wherever there is life and enhances human efficiency. Many communication scholars and other professionals have at various times attempted precise definitions of communication but none of them has been able to proffer a universally acceptable definition that satisfies all communication purposes.

When the word "communication" is mentioned in any literate society, people tend to have a fair idea of what the speaker or writer intends to say, yet this may not translated to the understanding of what communication is. However, when there is effective communication, there is understanding among the participants in the communication situation. It is obvious that communication is a fundamental element of social interaction in the society. It is humanly impossible to give an all-embracing definition of communication. The easiest way of defining communication is to attach such definition to a particular case or situation. Now consider a scenario where an expectant young father who is not allowed into a labour room or theatre where his wife is to be delivered of the young family's first child. The man is anxious and curious. He stands by the door eavesdropping. After sometime he hears the cry of a baby from the labour room or theatre. The cry immediately informs the man that he has a new born baby. Then communication has taken place. This scenario shows that communication is one of the first social activities or professions that a human being engages in after birth. From the above, the following simple definitions of communication ensue:

Communication is the transmission of idea, message or information from a source to a receiver. Transmission here indicates that there is a starting point and a destination principally occupied by the source and the receiver respectively. This can be represented with a linear model thus:

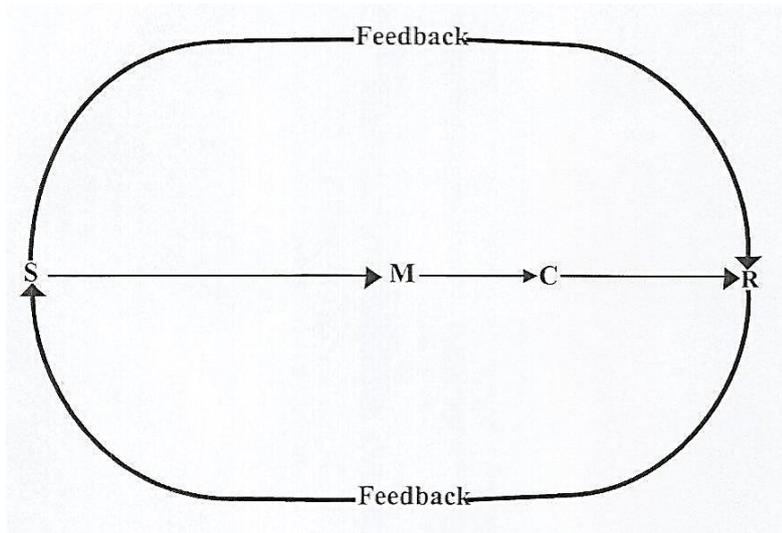


S =source, M= Message, C= Channel and R = receiver

In this case there is no room for interaction between the S and the R, as such there is no room for immediate feedback. Also, communication is the expression of feelings or experience. In this case the source does not really have a particular person in mind as the receiver. A typical example is the first cry of a baby at birth or where an adult soliloquises. In both cases, the person that perceives the message is automatically the receiver.

Communication is "the transmission of a message from a source to a receiver"(Baran, 2006, p. 4). Baran goes on to cite Laswell (1948) as stressing that a convenient way to describe communication is to answer the questions: Who says What? Through which channel? To whom? With what effect?

Apart from the simple definitions, communication can be defined to include the communication environment and participants in the process. In that case, communication is the transmission of ideas, knowledge, belief or attitude from one person to another within a given social organisation or situation. Here, communication becomes a process. Again, "communication is a social interaction in which the source transmits a message to the receiver who assimilates the message and responds with appropriate feedback to the extent of altering the behaviour of both the source and the receiver" (Senam, 2020. P. 3). The process of selecting, processing and sending the message is called encoding while the process of perceiving, understanding and assimilating the message is called decoding. Encoding is usually done by the source while decoding is done by the receiver. It should be noted that the source and the receiver can exchange roles where the communication is interactional. Both encoding and decoding involve intellectual activity called psycho-cognitive process. In a single communication transaction, the source can become the receiver and vice versa. This can be expressed graphically thus:



Feedback is indispensable when communication is interactional. At this level communication involves cognitive, logical and psycho-motor processes which bring about understanding among the communicators.

Many elements are involved to complete the communication process, which ultimately results in meaning sharing. Dominick (2009) identifies the basic ones as follows:

- (i) **Source:** The source is the person who originates the message, normally after selecting and processing the message intended to be transmitted to the other entity. The source could sometimes be referred to as the sender or the encoder. Source also means where the message emanates from while encoder means the person who transforms the message into an understandable sign and symbol system called the code.
- (ii) **Context:** This relates to the place, time, setting and situation that prompt the communication.
- (iii) **Message:** This is the code, stimulus or the actual product or contents that the source sends to the decoder.

- (iv) **Channel/Medium:** This is the vehicle that conveys the message or the way through which the message travels to the receiver. It could be through the sound waves (for spoken words), through the light waves (for visual messages), air current (serves as olfactory channels carrying messages or stimuli to the nose) etc.
- (v) **Receiver:** The receiver perceives the message and translates or interprets it into a form that eventually makes meaning to the receiver. This process is called decoding. The receiver at various instances could be called the decoder, audience etc.
- (vi) **Feedback:** This is the reaction or response that the receiver makes, that shapes and alters the subsequent messages of the source,
- (vii) **Noise:** Literally, noise is anything that interferes with the delivery of the message to the receiver. In other words, noise is an unwanted message or stimulus that interferes with or alters the intended meaning of the source.

Outside the above components, there is also the **feed forward**. A feed forward is a sort of "message before a message". It is any signal, stimulus or cue that gives a clue on the upcoming message. It should be noted that, as the communication process progresses, the participants keep inter-changing their roles as source and receiver (Baran, 2007).

### **Types of Communication**

Communication can be broadly categorised into two: personal communication and mass communication. Personal communication could be intra-personal or inter-personal. Intra-personal communication occurs when the communicator communicates to himself or herself. That is, the communicator is both the source and receiver. Example is when a person "thinks aloud".. On the other hand, inter-personal communication is a communication that takes place between two persons or among many persons. In this type of communication, the source is distinct from the receiver, although they can exchange roles if the communication is

interactional. Examples of inter-personal communication include: dyadic communication, group communication, public communication etc.

With the emergence of information and communication Technologies (ICTs), the use of technological devices is not only applicable to mass communication, but also to inter-personal communication. With the ICTs, the use of cell phone, the e-mail etc for communication between persons who are not physically together is very common (Kovach & Rosensthiel (2001). It is only in intra-personal communication that technological devices are not necessary.

### **Mass Communication**

Mass communication is a type of communication in which the source communicates to a heterogeneous audience simultaneously through a mass medium. It is "message communicated through a mass medium to a larger number of people" (Bittner, 2004, p. 11). The mass media are indispensable institutions in mass communication. The word "mass" mainly predicates three things:

- (i) The non-personal nature of the communicator or source
- (ii) The heterogeneity of the audience or receivers
- (iii) The simultaneity of the message reception

The mass media are the channels through which mass communication messages pass to the audience. They are therefore the intermediaries between the mass communicator and the audience (that is the source and the receiver). They have two peculiarities:

- (i) Reaching a large number of people virtually at the same time
- (ii) Use of technological devices

There are two broad categories of mass media the print media (e.g. newspaper, magazines, book etc.) and the electronic media (e.g. radio, television etc.). The mass media

have so many characteristics which Senam (2020) enumerates to include: Mass media messages are designed for a mass audience.

- (i) The message is transient or fleeting, except the print media messages.
- (ii) Mass media messages are culture-bound and to some extent affected by time, season, environment and circumstances.
- (iii) The mass communicator (especially on the broadcast media) sounds personal but in strict sense is exhibiting a high rate of non-personal posture.
- (iv) Mass media audience is heterogeneous and they receive the messages virtually at the same time.
- (vi) Mass Media messages are usually pre-planned and produced.
- (vii) Technology is indispensable to the survival of the mass media.
- (viii) The establishment and operation of the mass media are strictly guided by law and professional ethics.
- (ix) Mass media messages usually pass through many persons or personnel technically referred to as the gate-keepers.
- (x) The mass media make use of delayed feedback mechanism, except in live interactive broadcast programmes.
- (xi) The mass media need a great deal of money to operate.
- (xii) In the contemporary society, mass media exist mainly to make money (in the case of privately owned media. Also privately owned media are established for other socio-economic and political reasons) or at least they generate money for their day-to-day operation (in the case of government-owned media). One fundamental issue in any media system is the media-society matrix; that is the interwoven relationship between the mass media institution and the society as

well as the mutual effect or contribution that each has on the other. The mass media are the technological devices or tools used to transmit the message of mass communication; they are a potent institution which constitutes a fundamental subset in the entire macro-society (Dominick, 2009). Although some people sometimes use mass communication and mass media interchangeably, they are remarkably different. While mass communication is a communication process, mass media are tools. Howbeit, mass media are predominantly the off-shoots of mass communication. They are a vital means of the source reaching out to receivers beyond the immediate proximity of the sender. They are the technologically manipulated devices that bridge the gap between the mass communicator and the mass audience by way of message dissemination. Also, the mass media build bridges among the various units and subsets in the society. This presents the media as a powerful institution in all ramifications.

The power of the mass media is based on their great reach and apparent impact on the audience and the society generally. The media are effective in shaping opinion and influencing behaviour as well as enhancing international relations and alliances; they are so essential and volatile that there is no sphere of the society that can survive without the mass media (Senam, 2012). It is instructive to note that, both the media and society are always complementary to each other. Their contributions to each

other's success are mutually indispensable. On one hand the success or otherwise of the mass media depends on the type of the society wherein the media are. The mass media provide vital information which strengthens the link between, and achieve the integration among various social groups. This helps the groups to develop together as a cohesive and well-organized society.

Also, the mass media serve as a conduit for the various forms of interactions among the different facets of the society. By their role in informing people, stimulating public opinion and affecting national and international integration understanding, the mass media are economic and social phenomena of our society. They sometimes turn common people to great ones; breed a reasonable rate of socialisation among the various peoples in the society and create avenue for entertainment and relaxation. The mass media perform the function of "mediating between the ordinary members of the society and a more distant and inaccessible world of events... by information at the very least, on a continuous basis" (McQuail, 2010, p. 109).

Moreover, while the society models out the type of media laws and policies, the mass media reshape the society to a certain perspective. The relations between media and society have significant political and normative dimensions. The central political issue here is the question of press freedom and control while the main normative question is on how the

press ought to use the freedom it has. The media-society matrix is based on the central themes of power and inequality, social integration and identity, social change and development as well as space and time (bridging the gap between individuals and period). The media - society relationship is further explained under the following subheads and theories:

**The Mass Society theory:** This relates to the generality of the various institutions and groups in the society. The theory, according to Igboanusi (2006), emphasises the interdependence of institutions that exercise power and strengthen the integration of the media into the sources of social power and authority. This highlights the fact that mass media contents are likely to serve the interest of political and economic power holders. This is so because the power holders have all it takes to control or manipulate the operation of the media.

**The Marxism:** This theory centres on the concept of class society. It underscores a direct link between economic ownership and the dissemination of messages that affirm the legitimacy and the value of a class society. The theory emphasises the ideological effects of the media in the interest of the ruling class in reproducing the essentially exploitative relationships and manipulation (Ogbu, 2002). This means it legitimises the dominance of capitalism by subordinating the working class in the society. The import of this in the media system is that, as the capitalists

contribute to the survival of the media, they (capitalists) manipulate the media for their selfish interest and continued dominance.

**The functionalism theory:** This simply has to do with the functions of mass communication in the society. It stresses the string of the relationship between the mass media and the needs of the society as well as those of individuals. Normally social life requires the continued portrayal and maintenance of accurate, consistent, supportive and complete picture of the society and of the social environment by the mass media (Waisbord, 2000). It is by responding to the demands of individuals and institutions in consistent ways that the media achieve significant functions for the society. There are three broad functions of the mass media in the society

- (i) Surveillance of the environment - information function
- (ii) Correlation of different elements of the society - assisting the various segments of to the society work together.
- (iii) Transmission of culture from one generation to the next.

The above represent the perfunctory roles of the mass media in the society, which are to: inform, educate and entertain.

Another perspective of expatiating on these functions is as follows:

- (i) **Surveillance (information):** This involves providing information about events and conditions in the society.

- (ii) **Correlation (agenda-setting):** explaining, interpreting and commenting on the meaning of events and information.
- (iii) **Continuity (cultural):** This entails expressing the dominant culture and recognising subcultures and every cultural development.
- (iv) **Status conferral (Honour):** The process by which the media portray an ordinary person by transforming him or her to an important personality (status).
- (v) **Social integration (Socialisation):** The process in which the media bring (integrate) the various peoples in the society together through the transmission of values, social norms and knowledge.
- (vi) **Entertainment (amusement):** This is where the media provide means of reducing social tension, diversion and means relaxation.
- (vii) **Mobilisation (campaign):** This is where the media articulate (campaign for) societal objectives in the sphere of politics, war, economic development, work and sometimes religion.

**Critical Political Economy:** In this case the emphasis is on the socially critical approach that focuses primarily on the relationship between the economic structure and the dynamics of the media industry; and the ideological content of the media, as well as the political power of the day (Ikpe, 2000). In this case, the nature of media-society relationship is assessed on the basis of ownership structure, control of the media and the operation of market forces. The most likely consequences are the reduction

of independent sources of media revenue, concentration on the large market and avoidance of risks through the reduction of investment in some media tasks such as investigative reporting and documentary film production.

**The Social Constructionism theory:** The social constructionism emphasises on how the mass media represent the events in the society to reflect the daily realities (Glasser, 1999). This theory indicates that the task of agenda-setting is a joint role of both the society and the media in the sense that members of the society make the myriad of events to happen, then the media select a few and construct in a way that makes meaning to the audience. The social realities in the society are therefore usually given meanings or interpretation by the mass media through selection interpretation, production and transmission processes called gate-keeping. The interpretation is mainly determined by who owns the media, who operate the media and who are involved in the events.

**The Communication Technology Determinism:** This relates to the use of technological devices to facilitate the functioning of communication in the society. According to Griffin (2000), the use of technology in communication practice is an outflow of McLuhan's technological determinism theory which has vindicated the tendency to concentrate on the implications of communication and social change for technology and other sociological variables in the society. In view of this, in the contemporary society, communication has experienced several trends especially a shift,

over time, in the direction of more speed, greater dispersion, wider reach and greater flexibility. These are the reflections of contemporary communication technologies and constitute the basis of McLuhan's postulation on the concept of the *global village* (1948) which he asserted that the rapid growth in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) will very soon shrink the whole world (globe) into a small village. The relationship here is that the mass media use the technological devices in the society to gather and process media contents and also feed the society with the contents.

**The Information Society:** The evolving and revolutionary social transactions in the society have resulted in the development of sophisticated information and communication technologies, ICTs. This in turn results in a higher efficiency of the mass media reaching out to the world more easily and speedily. This is referred to as neo-technological determinism (Ferguson, 1986). The neo-technological determinism represents a belief which tends to operate as a self-fulfilling prophecy McLuhan's *global village* construct. Communication revolution or information society is a descriptive terminology used in explaining our contemporary time and the type of society which is emerging in the digital age.

Generally, the mass media-society relationship could be summed up with the fact that based on the complex web of dependency, relations and social matrix in the society, the media play the fundamental role of tightening the bond between all the facets of the society. Every system

within the society usually advertently or inadvertently increases its dependency on the media. On the other hand, the media system usually establishes new relationships that become more or less essential to its well-being and survival within the society. To really appreciate the media-society relationship, it is instructive to imagine how personal and social life would be if for some inexplicable reasons all the mass media that we have today suddenly vanished. Actually, the society cannot survive without the mass media; neither can the mass media survive without the society.

### **Social Responsibility**

Social responsibility is the obligation or the duty that the media owe the society. This is based on the fact that the media institution is a corporate citizen which obligations in the society go beyond the mere perfunctory functions of the mass media but to the extent of meaningful contribution to the well-being and development of the society (Senam and Udo, 2015). This then presents the media as a social institution which articulates socialisation and also socialises with other facets of the society.

Although the social responsibility of the mass media is virtually as old as the history of the mass media, it did not receive much attention early as a fundamental concept or even a theory in communication and media study. Social responsibility was popularised in communication circle in 1947 with postulation of the Social Responsibility Theory by F. S. Siebert, T. B. Peterson and W. Schramm. The origin of the theory is traceable to the report of the 1947 Hutchins commission on the freedom of the press (Siebert, Peterson and Schramm, 1963). The Hutchins commission (1947) was set up to examine areas and circumstances under which the press of the United States was succeeding or failing; to discover whether

freedom expression was or was not limited; whether by government censorship, pressure from the audience or advertisers or the "unwisdom" of the proprietors or the timidity of its management. The findings of the commission formed the basis of some substantial theories and the practice of accountability. The commission supported the concept of diverse, objective, informative and independent press institution which does not encourage crime, violence or disorder in the society.

The social responsibility theory, therefore stresses the view of media ownership and practice as a form of public trust or stewardship, rather than as an unlimited private franchise or instrument for the suppression of the press freedom. The thesis of the social responsibility theories revolves around public interest since the freedom of expression and the free press is an invaluable right of mankind. This then calls for the press maintaining a state of neutrality and avoiding sensationalism. Satisfying the interest of the public is a fundamental step towards a satisfactory press freedom. There are two schools of thought concerning the public interest stance of the press: "Majoritarian" and "Unitarian" or "absolutist" views.

In the majoritarian view, issues should be settled by references to the popular vote. Going by this reasoning, public interest is equated to giving the public what it wants; pleasing the majority of the mass media content consumers in the media market. On the other hand, the Unitarian or absolutist view is that the public interest should be decided by reference to some single dominant value or ideology that prevails in the society. In order to streamline these two views to bring about a commendable satisfaction of public interest, the approach to public interest should involve a debate and democratic decision-making in order to unveil what constitute the interests of the public. It should be noted that:

Whatever the arguments about the concept of public interest, it is quite obvious that the mass media have everywhere been subject to extensive control and regulation by law and other formal or

informal means, with a view to getting them to do what society wants or to prevent them from doing what it doesn't (McQuail, 2010, p. 165).

The actual control or means of control is not universally the same. It varies from one country to another, one media system to another.

However, in most media systems the basic ingredients of the control involve political, cultural and economic determinants prevalent in the society. These determinants vary from one media system to another in terms of priority, but in any media system they apply, they tend to be internally consistent and coherent. In judging the level of public interest, Watson (2003) enumerates the following as fundamental requirements for social responsibility of the mass media:

- (i) Freedom of the publication
- (I) Plurality of ownership of the mass media
- (ii) Diversification of information, opinion and culture
- (iii) Support for public order and the security of the state
- (iv) Extensive reach
- (v) Quality of information published to the public
- (vi) Adequate support for democratic political system
- (vii) Respects for individuals and general human rights
- (viii) Avoidance of harm and offence to the society and individuals

In all circumstances and media systems, it is better for social responsibility to be discharged through self-control, not government intervention. Albeit, social responsibility entails that the government must not merely allow freedom, it must actively promote it. Government does not have to slaughter press freedom on the platter of the government's convenience and pleasure; rather, government should help in protecting the freedom of its citizens. One of the

central themes of social responsibility is that "...freedom carries concomitant obligation, and the press which enjoy a privileged position under the government, is obliged to be responsible to society for carrying out certain essential functions of mass communication" (Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso, 2008, p. 54).

The social responsibility is a product of the liberation theory (the opposite of authoritarian theory). This is based on the fact that while the press may be free from government interference, it can still be controlled by corporate interests of corporations and individuals. This advocates a non-authoritarian media control. Again, For Hanson (2005) social responsibility hinges on the fact that the high level of concentrated power in the hands of the media requires that they be socially responsible in covering all sides of controversial issues.

While protagonists of social responsibility advocate for freedom from absolute ownership and control of the mass media by the government, they also oppose the concentration of ownership and monopoly of control, whether on the part of the state or the private media industry. The guiding principle is that the media system should not be dominated by a few controlling interests and that citizens should have access to the mass media to air their views and articulate their interests and needs.

Simply stating, the social responsibility underscores the responsibility that the mass media owe the society (Udoakah, 2014). On the basis of the foregoing, Senam (2020) identifies the following as the main principles of the responsibility are as follows:

- (i) Much as the mass media have the power do, they owe the society some obligations.
- (ii) Mass media ownership is a matter of public trust.
- (iii) The mass media are in a fiduciary relationship with the society.
- (I) The mass media contents should be informative, truthful, accurate, fair, objective and balance.

- (ii) The mass media should be free, but self-regulatory. The self-regulation should be within the framework of the applicable laws and professional ethics.
- (iii) The mass media should follow the agreed codes of ethics and professional conduct.
- (iv) The mass media should avoid whatever might lead to crime, violence, civil disorder or offence to minority groups.
- (v) Accountability of the media professionals should be to the society, the employers and the media market.
- (vi) Under some situations and circumstances government may need to intervene in mass media practice to safeguard the public interest.

Going by the precepts of the social responsibility, every mass medium is a corporate citizen which must discharge its obligations to the society. Primary among such obligations is the unwaivable and uncompromisable responsibility to ensure that citizens are fed with the appropriate, sufficient and accurate information on issues of relevance to enable the citizens reach rational discernment on issues of significance.

### **Mass Media, Social Responsibility and Accountability**

The social responsibility of the media has to do with the obligation and duties of the mass media to the society. By reason of the fiduciary relationship between the media and the society, the responsibility of the media is not merely to publish information or other media contents, the media must also take the interest and taste of the society into consideration. Mass media contents must reflect the media's social responsibility to the society. The reflection is a pointer to accountability of the mass media. Accountability is "... a frame of reference within which expectations concerning conduct and responsibility arise and claims are expressed" (McQuail, 2010, p. 211). The frame also indicates or governs the ways in which such claims should be handled. Social responsibility and accountability most often

revolve around the relationship between the mass media and the society whom the media serve.

Accountability, as it relates to social responsibility, can be defined in two ways: first, as a requirement to give an account of one's actions, either directly or to the public or through public authorities. Secondly, it means being liable to sanction if found guilty or in breach of some requirements or expectations attaching to the exercise of power or privilege. Within the realm of media's social responsibility, it is expected that the media can at any time be required or called upon to explain or justify their professional actions. Also, accountability is a means of identifying a problem, naming the media outlet responsible and claiming some apology or compensations. Again: "Media accountability is all the voluntary or involuntary processes by the media answer directly or indirectly to their society for the quality and/or consequences publication" (McQuail, 2010, p. 207). The major elements that contribute to accountability are part of the normal operation of the media. Social responsibility and accountability should normally cover two criteria: Respect rights to free publication and promotion of positive aspects of publication rather than merely being restrictive.

These criteria reflect the primary responsibilities of the media to freedom of expression, obligations to individual's right, needs and interest as well as the general media-society interaction. For Feintuk (1999), media accountability could be assessed based on four broad categories:

**Law and Regulations:** The policies, rules and regulations that affect media structure and operation.

**Finance/Market:** A mechanism of accountability which balances the interests of media organisations and producers and those of their clients and audience.

**Public Responsibility:** This refers to the media also as social institutions that fulfill certain important tasks. The media are expected to serve the public interest in matters of information, publicity and culture, among others.

**Professional Responsibility:** This is media accountability that arises out of the self-respect and sound ethical disposition of media professionals who set their own standard for good performance. Responsibility refers to the obligations and expectations that are directed at the media. The extent of fulfilling these obligations and meeting up the expectations determines the level of accountability. Closely related to media accountability is the watchdog role of the mass media.

### **Mass Media and the Watchdog Construct**

The mass media are central in the society and are powerful enough to breach the gap between the various elements or spheres of the society thereby connecting the different institutions in the society through information that enlightens the people on the goings-on in the society. Senam & Udoakah (2018) take a sociological look at the society and the media. For them, the society is naturally very vast and the daily events of public concern are multifarious; hence it is difficult for members of the public to be aware of everything that happens around them, even in their immediate neighbourhood. This calls for an intermediary, the mass media, to transmit information from the source or centre point to the people. The media do not merely relate the information to the members of the public, but to also raise an alarm to alert people when dangers are imminent or the dangers are already at hand thereby justifying the accolade, the watchdog. The mass media are widely recognised and statutorily empowered to perform their surveillance role. This is the whole gamut of the watchdog role of the mass media. According to Watson and Hill (2007, p. 303), “the mass media pride themselves on their role as watchdogs of justice, abuse and corruption; champions of public interest ... the watchdog barks on behalf of the people, in their defence against the powerful,

whether these are in government, business, industry or any work of life where the interest of the public can be affected”

*Section 22 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*, as amended, provides that: “The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people”. Therefore the watchdog role of the mass media is of two folds:

- (i) The responsibility of the media to alert the people of impending act that would be detrimental to the well-being of the society.
- (ii) The responsibility of the media to alert the people of malversation or occurrence of event or activity that is detrimental to the well being of the society or the system.

By these responsibilities and expectations, the mass media have the task of informing the people on the goings-on in the society. The media do this through various means such as interviewing public figures and challenging them with problems, concerns, expectations and aspirations of the people. The watchdog role of the mass media in information gathering and dissemination can manifest through:

- i. Cross-checking facts and statements of public officers and informing the public on the truth of every matter relating to such facts and statements.
- ii. Interviewing public officers to extract first-hand information to transmit to the audience.
- iii. Scooping information by way of beat reporting and packaging same for onward transmission to the audience.

In any circumstance, the watchdog construct in the milieu of mass media practice entails the mass media being the eye and the voice of the people. This dovetails into the mass media functioning as watchmen, agents of social control and pivot of moral guidance.

According to Hanson (2005) the watchdog construct was coined by Edmund Burke in

the late 18th century in England to refer to the practical power of the mass media in influencing the general cause of the society in line with the aspiration and desires of the people. Initially the watchdog construct or metaphor related to the power and role of the media vis-à-vis the political sphere of the society. The term was mainly used to describe the role of the mass media in revealing the abuse of state authority as well as the protection of the democratic and constitutional rights of the citizens. In contemporary times, the watchdog role of the mass media covers all aspects and facets of life in the society. The watchdog here can now be likened to the proverbial dog in the manger and the red tilapia (fish). The dog in the manger guards or protects the meat from being preyed upon while the red tilapia (fish) stays by the entrance without entering the fish trap and at the same time prevents other fish from entering. Given this scenario, the mass media perform the watchdog role by gathering, processing, packaging and transmitting messages on issues of public interest to the audience responsibly, with utmost truth and fairness according to the ideals of communication for the development and unity of the society. Anything less of this amounts to a breach of trust since, in the strictest sense, the mass media-society relationship is a fiduciary relationship. A fiduciary relationship is a relationship that is grounded in utmost trust and confidence.

Moreover, like the literal watchdog or guard dog that barks when it notices an intruder or enemy, the mass media, have the task of alerting the public when danger looms or when the actual problem is detected. Such dangers or problems include, but not limited to, wrong decision or policy by government, illegal activities in the society, immorality, social anomaly, environmental degradation, scandals, corruption, self-enrichment among public officers, abuse of power by security operatives and other types of wrong-doings. The watchdog thus functions as an agent of transparency as well as means of checks and balances.

The mass media, as the fourth estate in the realm, perform the watchdog role by supplying the citizens with information that they need in order to prevent the abuse of power

and to warn citizens against those doing them social harms. To play these roles creditably, the mass media need to bridge the psychological and attitudinal gulf between them and those in position of authorities, especially those who abuse such authorities. Thus, as watchdogs, the media need not be agents or instruments of propaganda. Inordinate loyalty and conformity is undesirable if the mass media must perform their watchdog roles and remain champions of order and impartiality. The mass media must be a detached watchdog which inversely means a detached observer. A detached watchdog is naturally not interventionist but uninvolved. This quality is therefore used to explain the position of objectivity, neutrality and impartiality as the weapons of a watchdog.

Also, as watchdogs, the mass media help in holding the society's power brokers and rule-makers to account and work towards the collective needs of the society. For Malemi (2009), the press is a watchman or monitor of government. But who watches the watchman? It is necessary to watch the watchman or the watchdog so that it can effectively perform its constitutional role and live up to its responsibility. This raises the issue of mass media control mechanism. The watchdog also needs to be watched for the sake of accountability and for the avoidance of excesses and abuse of privilege. There are many mechanisms that constitute the crux of those watching the watchdog. These include institutional control, such as the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), the Nigerian Press Council, the Nigerian Copyright Commission; government, law and policy; audience members; advertisers and business moguls; owners and proprietors; socio-cultural variables; ethical codes and professional bodies as well as international standard, global best practice and media philosophy. This means the media are not an unwatched watchdog. Thus, although the mass media are powerful and function as a watchdog in the society, the society does not consider them as saints or institutions that need no monitoring. The society fashions out instruments, institutions and modalities of checking the activities of the mass media for the betterment of

the society.

## **Conclusion**

From the fore-going discourse, appraisal of the Nigerian mass media, it is concluded that, the legitimate control and regulation of the mass media make for effectiveness of services and commendable professionalism in the media system. It is obvious that in addition to all forms of legitimate control mechanisms of the mass media, it still behoves the media to regulate, discipline and control themselves to the extent of voluntarily discharging duties and responsibilities in the society concomitant with the contribution of the society to the existent of the mass media. As a matter of social responsibility, the mass media are expected to contribute positively good life in the society.

The media should be seen to be responsive to environmental factors as well as the yearnings and aspirations of members of the society as much as possible. This, according to Udoakah (2006) calls for communication enterprise routinely evaluates its performance in areas of greatest social impact or potential social impact in the society. By and large, social responsibility entails that the media are corporate citizens and as such should always act as good citizens towards the betterment of social life in the society.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this paper, it is recommended as follows:

1. As the mass media are in a fiduciary relationship with the society, media workers should be professionally conscious in order to meet audience expectations from the media.
2. Mass media operators should make the media show accountability and responsibility through fair, accurate and objective reportage.

3. Members of the society should avoid mounting undue pressure on the media so that the media can be well focused for greater efficiency and commendable services to the society.
4. Mass media operators should ensure editorial independence of the media by avoiding undue acculturation with news attributes and personages so that media credibility may not be tampered with.

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